



Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance

Testimony of Ann Pratt, Executive Director, Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance
Before the Appropriations Committee

Senator Harp, Representative Walker, and distinguished members of the committee,

On behalf of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, early childhood advocates and early childhood programs, I would like to applaud the renewed interest in early care and education that has been demonstrated by the Governor and the legislature. The research is abundantly clear-- that we can make an enormous difference in the lives of our young people if we act to provide them with high-quality learning environments as early as possible.

Please accept my written testimony regarding several items in the Governor's budget proposal: the appropriations for early childhood programs, the Care4Kids childcare subsidy, DSS State-Funded Child Development Centers, and consolidating and coordinating programs.

Appropriations for Early Childhood Programs

We strongly support many of Governor Malloy's proposed FY 12-13 budget items including maintaining or increasing funding for the majority of early care and education programs, making much-needed improvements in the areas of efficiency and transparency, and showing some acknowledgment of the need for an early childhood system. Specifically, we support the Governor's proposed increase in funding over FY 11 expenditures for state-funded child care centers, School Readiness competitive school districts and the Graustein Memorial Fund's Discovery communities initiative. He has recommended that several other programs -- such as Family Resource Centers, State Head Start, Head Start Enhancement, Bridgeport's ABCD Total Learning Initiative, and Improving Early Literacy -- remain at FY 11 projected expenditure levels during FY 12 and 13. Furthermore, several of these proposed appropriations represent investments in public/private partnerships, a to work with the early care and education community to maximize all available resources.

Care 4 Kids Child Care Subsidy:

One aspect of the early care and education budget that causes concern is the Care4Kids program. Although this is an item within the Department of Social Services, we wanted to raise our concerns with this committee because the Care4Kids program also provides crucial support for School Readiness programs, as well as local school districts. For FY 12, the proposed budget recommends only \$97.6 million. This is a \$5.8 million (5.6%) decrease in appropriations from FY 11. The cost of quality child care can be prohibitive for thousands of families in Connecticut. Currently, parents are faced with paying up to 27% of their income per child for a quality early learning setting. Child care providers who serve low-income parents work tirelessly to ensure their services are high quality as well as affordable. Central to this delicate system is the Care 4 Kids child care subsidy. Parents depend upon it to keep their children in a safe, quality child care environment and providers count on it to keep their doors open. This subsidy is crucial throughout the child care industry—from family providers, to private child care centers to our school readiness programs. We urge the legislature to maintain or increase the funding for this essential component of child care in Connecticut.

DSS State-Funded Child Development Centers

In the Governor's budget proposal, DSS State Funded Child Development Centers are shifted from DSS to SDE and placed under the School Readiness framework.

The School Readiness program is fundamental to preparing Connecticut's young children to be successful in school, and ensures high quality and consistent educational opportunities in Competitive and Priority school districts. Similarly, DSS State Funded centers provide equally high quality programming, but with a different focus and scope of services. It is extremely important that DSS State-Funded Child Development Centers and School Readiness retain their independent missions and statutes. DSS State-Funded Center should not be folded into School Readiness or vice versa because the programs each meet an important need in early care and education.

DSS State-Funded Centers serve infant and toddlers as well as pre-schoolers. School readiness does not accept any infants and toddlers. DSS State Funded Centers are located in many communities, not just those identified as Priority or Competitive district by SDE. School Readiness is only available Priority and Competitive districts. DSS State Funded Centers are tasked with serving low-income working parents as an important work support/incentive. School Readiness has no work requirement.

Consolidating and Coordinating Programs

The previous item appears to be an attempt to consolidate and coordinate early childhood programs, however, the Alliance strongly believes that simply putting early childhood programs into the Department of Education is not the answer. The State Department of Education is responsible for implementing and administering a massive set of policies and programs for all of Connecticut's children in grades K-12th. Expecting this same Department to also effectively monitor and administer a set of comprehensive early care and education strategies targeted to the social, emotional and educational development of non-school-age children will be a difficult task, and it could potentially undermine the commitment and focus that is essential for developing a effective, efficient and comprehensive early care and education system.

The Alliance believes the creation of a Department devoted to early childhood, just as North Carolina and Massachusetts have effectively done, is the more desirable approach.

Currently in Connecticut, seven different state agencies, with disparate funding streams and reporting requirements, administer early childhood programs. Data collection is not standardized or coordinated, so no longitudinal studies have been or can be done, and there are no uniform quality standards nor is there a uniform quality rating system.

The creation of a Department of Early Childhood will consolidate and streamline current services and achieve better results. Such a Department would oversee each of the five major programs, while maintaining their independent missions and services.